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## **Regional cities and Greater Paris: A moment of indifference**

Daniel Béhar & Matilin Le Meur

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### **Summary (short abstract)**

The seventh cross-cutting volume in the Cahiers POPSU series (published by Autrement), authored by Daniel Béhar and Matilin Le Meur, examines the changing relationship between France's major regional metropolitan areas and the Greater Paris urban area. The authors highlight a period of mutual indifference during which the territorial strategies of both sides favoured a 'glocal' approach, oscillating between the global horizon of competition within a context of 'territorial Darwinism'; and issues of immediate local concern. Under the influence of decentralisation (notably the MAPTAM Act), the metropolitan areas have focused on managing their hinterlands, issues of local solidarity and the regulation of territorial spillover. This 'moment' marks a break with the old model of the national urban framework, which was formerly centralised and hierarchical under the aegis of the State and viewed through the prism of the Paris–provinces dichotomy.

By exploring various local contexts such as those of Lyon, Bordeaux and Montpellier, it becomes clear that whilst Paris has long been the model of modernity, the capital 'no longer sets the trend for metropolitan development'. In terms of governance or urban projects, certain regional metropolises (Lyon, Bordeaux, Nantes) have become such benchmarks that the national territorial narrative is being diluted in favour of interconnected and autonomous networks. Greater Paris is perceived as an undesirable institutional exception, managed according to a form of 'organised anarchy' that cannot serve as a model.

However, this strategic indifference masks an unbreakable functional link. Paris remains the 'suction and discharge pump' of the French economy, redistributing wealth to the regions. Regional cities exploit this resource mechanically — for example, by attracting Parisian executives to live there — without feeling the need to develop an explicit strategy for cooperation with the capital.

The book thus suggests that this period of indifference may be drawing to a close. The challenges of the ecological transition and the quest for national sovereignty are imposing new agendas. Faced with vulnerabilities (in terms of public health and energy), metropolitan areas can no longer remain triumphant and isolated; they must rediscover their interdependencies.

Early signs already point to a shift towards a networked 'Metropolis France', where the challenges of decarbonisation and the circular economy (as in the Seine Valley) are forcing Paris and the regional metropolises to re-examine their relationships and to construct a new national narrative of cooperation

### **Abstract (long)**

The paper begins by proposing a fresh perspective on the Paris–province relationship. Whilst metropolitan areas are primarily understood as 'inter-territorial entities', characterised by a complex interweaving of spatialities, temporalities and actors, they are above all defined by the metropolisation policies they pursue. According to the authors, these policies have been dominated by 'glocal' approaches, in which attention is directed either towards the immediate hinterland and its local systems, or towards the global sphere and the network of global cities. Whilst this dynamic facilitates the integration of territories into a globalised economy, it renders the intermediate level of inter-territorial relations invisible. This process of metropolisation has led to a form of 'denationalisation' of urban systems, meaning that the relationships between French metropolises, and between them and Paris, have largely been overlooked. But what if this period of indifference were merely a historical interlude? The emergence of issues relating to the vulnerability of systems and national sovereignty creates a window of opportunity to re-examine the relationship between Paris and the provinces. Contrary to the discourse on de-metropolisation, the current challenge is characterised by the advent of a 'new era of metropolitan public action'. This new model could re-embed metropolitan areas within a coherent national narrative, moving beyond the sole prism of growth and attractiveness to be based on inter-territorial solidarity.

The second chapter takes a retrospective look at the last two decades of metropolitan development in France, comparing the regional capitals with the national capital. At the start of this century, future studies put forward, amongst the scenarios envisaged, that of 'networked polycentrism' to ensure territorial balance. Twenty years later – the study was entitled 'France 2020' – reality instead reveals a hybrid form of metropolisation, in which France's major cities are moving away from national interdependencies in favour of a 'wide gap' between the global and the local. On the one hand, they seek to compete internationally by becoming connected 'hubs'; on the other, they prioritise local ties through 'innovation clusters'. This dynamic, amplified by European integration, enables them to bypass the traditional vertical hierarchy centred on Paris in order to establish

direct and coherent international relations. Paradoxically, the State has encouraged this strategic self-centredness: by providing each region with standardised facilities and labels (competitiveness clusters, university investments), it has fostered widespread competition at the expense of national inter-city cooperation. The Greater Paris project completes this break with the past. Conceived by the State as a response to the urgent need to maintain France's standing in the face of Asian and American 'global cities', it focuses on specialised clusters (Saclay) and maritime connectivity (the Seine corridor). However, this national project is being implemented without the involvement of regional metropolitan areas, which stand to gain nothing from it. Thus, the ambition to project the French urban system onto the global stage paradoxically leads to its fragmentation: each metropolitan area overemphasises its own 'gateways' to the world, neglecting the cohesion of the national system.

Building on this analysis, the third section examines the effects of the MAPTAM Act on this metropolitan development. In 2014, the legislature recognised the existence of 21 French metropolitan areas, conferring upon them responsibility for economic and urban development, as well as territorial cohesion. These institutions face the 'glocal' tension previously outlined by the authors: how to reconcile international competition with the management of local interdependencies, or how to move from a purely 'economistic' and globalised vision to an integrated approach that values solidarity and territorial cooperation? To establish their legitimacy, particularly in the face of the perceived divide between major centres and 'peripheral France' – a theme emerging at the same time – the metropolitan areas are seeking to demonstrate the benefits of collective action. This is reflected in the emergence of new frameworks for action based on territorial reciprocity. Tools such as 'alliances of territories' (Nantes, Lyon) or reciprocity agreements (Brest, Tours, Strasbourg) enable the management of shared resources — water, food, transport — and help to structure metropolitan dynamics beyond administrative boundaries. Elsewhere, specific levers are being activated to forge a shared identity: the landscape in Aix-Marseille or healthcare in Orléans. Conversely, Greater Paris is constrained by a limited geographical scope (the central city and the inner suburbs), which complicates horizontal cooperation with its neighbours. Ultimately, metropolitan action in France is now being shaped at the intersection of two inseparable perspectives: 'the world as a horizon and proximity as a foundation'.

The fourth stage of the analysis examines the growing disconnect between Greater Paris and the regional metropolises. For the latter, Paris is no longer the sole model for their development. Whilst the capital has long embodied urban modernity, the current process of metropolisation is giving rise to new values linked to governance and the quality of urban projects – areas in which Paris no longer sets the trend. At the institutional level, the authors endorse the thesis of 'organised anarchy' put forward in a volume edited by Francesca Artoli and Patrick Le Galès to describe the formulation of urban policies within Greater Paris, given its legislative complexity and the fragmentation of powers between the State, the Region,

the metropolitan authority and (above all) the local authorities. However, this type of governance cannot serve as a model. In contrast, the approaches employed in Nantes and Lyon appear more appealing and potentially replicable. Nantes is recognised for its integrated management of the city centre and its outskirts, as well as for the involvement of civil society, whilst Lyon stands out for its stable cooperation with economic stakeholders and its unique political status, electing its metropolitan president by direct universal suffrage. Furthermore, regional metropolitan areas are increasingly looking to European models such as Barcelona or Milan. Consequently, the turn of the century saw the development of major 'Euro'-type projects: Euralille, Euroméditerranée and Euratlantique. These 'metropolis-building' initiatives acted as catalysts for competitiveness, bringing in internationally renowned 'starchitects' to boost their visibility and attract investment. The path taken by Greater Paris was quite different; during this period, it did not see any major urban projects of this kind, despite calls for Innovative Urban Projects (APUI), such as 'Reinventing Paris' or 'Let's Invent the Greater Paris Metropolis'. This innovative approach to urban development, involving consortia of developers and designers, is one of the few Parisian initiatives to have been adopted by other French cities, and above all by European and international metropolises.

Does this mean that regional cities have completely sidelined Greater Paris in their development vision? No, the authors assert. Far from being an 'overlooked' by these metropolitan areas; Paris is simply no longer a 'strategic horizon' because it is *taken for granted* and no longer *needs to be structured*. It is this 'strategic indifference' that is highlighted here. Paris, a 'global city' and a 'hub for flows', redistributes wealth and dynamism to the regions, as illustrated by the 2024 Olympic Games, which were held first in Paris and then in other regions. This is also illustrated by regional lobbying to secure high-speed rail links, with the dual aim of reducing the distance to the capital and strengthening regional autonomy in development. This 'free-wheeling' configuration, linked to the relative withdrawal of the State, uses Paris as a mechanical lever rather than an operational strategic horizon.

The following chapter begins with a look back, enabling us to better appreciate this second phase in relations between the regional metropolises and Paris, and thus to gain a more nuanced understanding of this period of mutual indifference. The authors point out that French metropolisation stems from a state-led planning ambition aimed at correcting the imbalance between Paris and the provinces. In 1964, this ambition led to the creation of the 'métropoles d'équilibre' (Lyon, Marseille, Lille, Bordeaux, etc.), designed to modernise major regional cities and keep populations in the provinces. The aim was to build 'multiplied forms of Paris' by equipping these hubs with attractive urban landmarks, such as business districts built on concrete slabs (La Part-Dieu in Lyon or Mériadeck in Bordeaux, the Centre-Bourse in Marseille, etc.). At the same time, the State restructured the Paris Basin through a policy of industrial decentralisation. Based on an organic approach, this strategy organised a 'spillover' of excess growth from the Île-de-France region towards the periphery: planning

remained centralised (in Paris) whilst

implementation was delegated to neighbouring areas (the Seine Valley, the Middle Loire). This system relied on radial infrastructure facilitating bilateral links with the capital. However, this model very quickly ran into major difficulties. By prioritising equal treatment among the 'balanced' metropolitan areas, the State produced generalist metropolitan areas equipped with the same facilities and infrastructure in the same sectors, rendering collaboration between them relatively pointless. According to the geographer Michel Rochefort, these policies thus resulted in the creation of 'cities-plus' rather than metropolitan areas, as they disconnected urban development from the productive system, *ultimately* fostering deindustrialisation. Thus, the transition to 'Age 2', characterised by decentralisation and global competition, saw Paris and the regional metropolitan areas 'turn their backs on one another'.

The final chapter examines the conditions of French metropolisation in the era of climate change, which represents a major paradigm shift, moving from a model based on competitiveness and attractiveness to a quest for resilience in the face of environmental vulnerabilities. Once perceived as triumphant, these areas now appear fragile due to their dependence on external resources, forcing them to recognise and nurture territorial interdependencies to sustain their functioning. This transition is reflected in a shift from 'self-centred' action to 'cooperative' action. Numerous examples, notably documented in the work of POPSU, illustrate this shift: the Lille metropolitan area within the national energy network; Bordeaux and shared food governance; and Lyon and the decarbonisation of industrial sectors in the 'Chemical Valley'. Elsewhere, territorial alliances are being formed to regulate spatial planning and limit urban sprawl. The concept of the 'Métropole France', developed by Pierre Veltz, describes this networked system, linking Paris – a global city – with a dozen regional metropolises. This model encourages us to consider the contribution of each component to national sovereignty and to global ecological transformation. Greater Paris itself is changing in character: whilst it initially aimed for global competitiveness (as exemplified by the Paris-Saclay cluster), it is increasingly focusing on the decarbonisation of its industrial base on an inter-territorial scale (for example, along the Seine corridor).

The authors conclude that the failure of the old spatial planning model thus calls for a new national narrative. The dual imperatives of environmental transition and national sovereignty offer an opportunity to shape this narrative. This new horizon requires active negotiation and cooperation between all territories.

## **Issues and public policy**

The book raises several major issues and debates concerning public policy at the territorial level in France, metropolisation and the relations between Paris and the country's major cities.

#### 1/ The tension between the 'global' and the 'local' in metropolitan development

Contemporary metropolitan policy is characterised by a strategic 'tug-of-war'. On the one hand, public policies aim to enhance international attractiveness and integration into economic globalisation through the creation of 'hubs' and 'innovation clusters'. On the other, they must manage local interdependencies (housing, services, transport) and socio-spatial divides within their hinterland. This dual agenda tends to obscure the intermediate scale of national inter-urban relations, which is nevertheless crucial in this era of ecological transition.

#### 2/ The absence of a Parisian model to follow...

Contrary to popular belief, Paris no longer sets the 'metropolitan trend'. In terms of governance, Greater Paris and its 'organised anarchy' stands as an exception that is neither desirable nor practicable for other cities, which draw more inspiration from European models (Barcelona, Rotterdam, Milan) for their major 'metropolis-building' urban projects (Euralille, Euroméditerranée, Euratlantique) than from the French capital.

#### 3/... but Paris remains an 'unshakable hub'

Far from being an 'overlooked' aspect of metropolitan areas, Paris is no longer a 'strategic horizon' because it is *a given* and does not *need to be structured*. Paris, a 'global city', remains a 'hub for flows', which has never ceased to draw in and then redistribute wealth and dynamism to the regions, as illustrated by the case of the 2024 Olympic Games, which took place first in Paris and then in other regions. This is also illustrated by regional lobbying for high-speed rail links, with the dual aim of reducing the distance to the capital and strengthening regional autonomy in development

#### 4/ The turning point of the ecological transition and sovereignty

The book identifies an emerging paradigm shift: the obsolescence of the model based exclusively on growth and competition. The new challenges of environmental vulnerability and national sovereignty (in energy, food and health) necessitate a transition towards cooperative metropolises. This requires recognising and regulating the physical and metabolic interdependencies between regions.

#### 5/ The quest for a new national narrative: 'Metropolis France'

A fundamental issue highlighted in the book is the need to re-embed metropolitan action within a coherent national narrative. The authors suggest moving beyond the current indifference to conceive of France as a 'networked metropolis': the 'France Metropolis'. This framework would enable the negotiation of transition efforts and the distribution of functions (such as data storage or industrial production) in a more balanced manner between the capital region and the regional metropolises. The book calls for a shift in public policy: moving away from fruitless competition to structure an integrated national spatial system, based on reciprocity and collective resilience in the face of climate and geopolitical crises.

**LinkedIn post**

📖 [POPSU Notebooks] 'Regional Metropolises and Greater Paris: A Moment of Indifference', by Daniel Béhar and Matilin Le Meur

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**Regional metropolitan areas and Greater Paris: the end of strategic indifference?** In their latest book, Daniel Béhar and Matilin Le Meur analyse spatial planning in France: we are experiencing a '**moment of mutual indifference**' between the major provincial cities and the capital.

Here are the key takeaways from this profound shift in public policy:

📖 **The triumph of 'Glocal':** Metropolises have turned their backs on the national level to focus on two extremes: international attractiveness ('global cities') and the management of their local solidarity networks (hinterland). The strategic link between French cities has become the 'great unthought'.

📖 **Paris no longer sets the trend:** Long regarded as the ultimate model, Greater Paris is now seen as an undesirable 'legislative exception' in terms of governance. For their major urban projects, regional metropolitan areas now look to Barcelona, Milan or Rotterdam rather than to the Seine.

📖 **A functional link that persists:** Whilst the indifference may be political, it is not economic. Paris remains the 'suction-and-discharge pump' that redistributes national wealth and supplies the regions with people seeking a new way of life.

📖 **What does the future hold?** We are at a **crossroads**. Faced with the challenges of **national sovereignty** and the **ecological transition**, the model of fruitless competition is giving way. The book calls for the emergence of a '**Metropolis France**': a decentralised, cooperative network capable of collectively managing our vulnerabilities.

An essential read for anyone thinking about the cities and regions of tomorrow.

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POPSU is run by the GIP Europe for Architectural and Urban Projects with the support of DGALN – Housing, Urban Planning, Renovation; DGALN – Water, Biodiversity, Landscape; ANCT – National Agency for Territorial Cohesion; Small Towns of Tomorrow; the Ministries of Ecology, Territory, Transport, Cities and Housing; and the Ministry of Culture; and the Banque des Territoires

